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Redefining roles: Human–AI collaboration in screenwriting

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Abstract

The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the way we tell stories – from the way we develop ideas to writing and production processes. This article presents a case study that followed the screenwriting processes, supported by generative AI, used in the making of *RENO*, a short science fiction film, produced by multi-award-winning Bristol-based visual effects (VFX) studio Lux Aeterna. *RENO* was developed as an industry case study as part of the UKRI-funded MyWorld programme, which explores the future of creative technology innovation in the south-west of the United Kingdom by pioneering new ideas, products and processes. This article shares findings from this case study, achieved through tracking the development of the screenwriting processes developed in the production of *RENO*, which included a series of interviews with those involved in the process. The findings highlight a nuanced relationship with generative AI, which, while initially embraced as a creative driver, the team ultimately found more valuable in specific creation and production contexts. This case study offers valuable insights for screenwriters, emphasizing the importance of both maintaining human creative control while also experimenting with emerging technologies through a reflective process. The article argues that defining generative AI's specific role in the screenwriting process, whether in the role of research assistant, character development tool, co-writer/writing partner or editor/critical friend, becomes a crucial part of the creative process.

Keywords: *RENO*; generative AI; studio Lux Aeterna; character development; artificial intelligence; storytelling; authorship

Introduction

This article presents a case study that followed the screenwriting processes used in the making of *RENO*, a short science fiction film developed by multi-award-winning Bristol-based visual effects (VFX) studio Lux Aeterna. The project represented a unique opportunity to examine real-world generative artificial intelligence (AI) use in creative contexts, offering insights that extend beyond theoretical discussions to practical applications and challenges. *RENO* was developed as an industry case study as part of the UKRI-funded MyWorld programme, which explores the future of creative technology

innovation in the south-west of the United Kingdom through pioneering new ideas, products and processes. The article shares findings from this case study, achieved through tracking the development of the screenwriting processes developed in the production of the film, including a series of interviews conducted with those involved in the process. This research follows their process from early experimentation through concept and character development, capturing a transitional period in the industry's relationship specifically with generative AI.

By documenting this project's evolution, we gain valuable insights into the practical applications, limitations and ethical considerations surrounding the use of generative AI specifically in screenplay development. While much critical discussion focuses on generative AI's potential to disrupt traditional workflows and creative processes (Halperin and Rosner 2025; Kawakami and Venkatagiri 2024), fewer studies examine its practical implementation within writing environments. This gap creates an opportunity to examine real-world use cases that inform both practitioners and researchers about ways that generative AI could be incorporated into creative practice. This article examines this process in detail to reach an understanding of how this technology can be incorporated into wider screenwriting practices.

Background, context and methodology

The role of AI in screenwriting was notably highlighted during the Hollywood writers' strike when the Writers Guild of America and production companies reached an agreement defining AI as a supporting tool rather than a replacement for writers (Anguiano and Beckett 2023). This landmark decision reflects broader concerns within the entertainment industry concerning technological displacement and creative autonomy, while establishing that AI cannot be considered a writer, nor can AI-generated material constitute source material for adaptation.

While generative AI has the potential to augment artists' creative expression through enhanced ideation processes and rapid iteration capabilities, particularly seen in script development (Erpelding et al. 2024) and in wider evaluation processes within the entertainment industry (Kim et al. 2019), it simultaneously poses significant threats to creative professions through several interconnected mechanisms. First, concerns about unethical data collection practices have emerged as AI models are trained on vast datasets that often include copyrighted creative works without explicit consent from their creators (Kawakami and Venkatagiri 2024). This raises fundamental questions about intellectual property rights and fair compensation for the creative labour that underpins these training datasets. Second, the potential for AI to replace human creative labour presents both immediate and long-term employment concerns within the industry. As Halperin and Rosner (2025) observe, these fears became particularly pronounced during the Hollywood writers' strike, where concerns about AI displacement were central to negotiations. Research reveals that large language

models (LLMs) lack long-range semantic coherence, limiting their usefulness for long-form creative writing (Mirowski et al. 2023).

Third, the homogenization effect of AI-generated content poses risks to creative diversity and originality. Since AI models are trained on existing works, they tend to reproduce established patterns and conventions rather than generating truly innovative approaches (Chow 2020). This tendency towards regression to the mean may inadvertently reinforce existing biases present in training data, potentially limiting representation and perpetuating problematic stereotypes across gender, racial and ideological dimensions (Benjamin 2019; Amaro 2022).

This relationship between human creativity and AI raises fundamental questions about the nature of screenwriting itself. Luchen and Zhongwei argue that '[a]rtificial intelligence, born from database training, is fundamentally different from human scriptwriting. Represented by intelligent scriptwriting, the intellect relies on data analysis rather than human growth and emotional experiences for literary creation' (2023: 4). This leads us to ask what exactly is AI's role in the screenwriting process? Is AI not a writer – what is it? Is it AI-supported or assisted writing? Or is it part of audience research, a focus group? A research assistant? Or perhaps, as Chow (2020) suggests, a co-writer in the writer's room? These questions about, but specifically generative AI's role in the creative process, form the central investigation of this article. As Dhillon et al. note, '[a]dvances in language modelling have paved the way for novel human-AI co-writing experiences', but 'there is the need for personalised scaffolding mechanisms' (2024: 1) to support this writing. The goal is to reach what Clark (2022) terms 'IA – Intelligence Amplification', developing into what might be called 'Creativity Amplification' in creative writing practice.

Within the *RENO* project, the Lux Aeterna production team had a dual purpose: to create a short film while simultaneously exploring and researching emerging technologies. This approach allowed the team to experiment without the constraints typically imposed by client expectations in their industry. A significant aspect of the project is that it features AI as a central character. Hermann terms science fiction featuring AI as 'science-fictional AI' as part of the genre of AI narratives, narratives featuring intelligent machines (The Royal Society 2018) and notes that 'SF films contain the fundamental motif of the human desire to create a living, intelligent or conscious creature of our own, independent of the real technical possibilities' (2021: 322).

This positions *RENO* within a rich tradition of AI-focused science fiction that has long served as a cultural space for exploring anxieties and aspirations concerning AI. As Dinello (2005) observes, science fiction cinema has consistently portrayed AI as both promise and threat, reflecting societal concerns about technological advancement and human agency. Similarly, Telotte (2001) argues that AI narratives in science fiction function as mirrors for human consciousness, allowing audiences to examine questions of identity, creativity and what constitutes authentic intelligence. More

recently, Cave and Dihal (2019) have demonstrated how AI narratives in popular culture significantly influence public understanding and policy formation around AI, suggesting that films such as *RENO* participate in broader cultural conversations about the role of AI in society.

The qualitative case study approach adopted by this research employs a longitudinal methodology based on semi-structured interviews, designed to capture the evolving nature of the use of AI in creative practice. The research design follows established qualitative methodologies in creative practice research, utilizing thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and modified for use in this specific research context, to identify patterns in participants' experiences with AI. The methodology was specifically chosen to allow detailed examination of how attitudes and approaches changed over time, providing insights into the dynamic relationship between creative professionals and AI.

In-depth interviews were conducted with key members of the *RENO* team: Rob Hifle, CEO and creative director of Lux Aeterna, and James Pollock, creative technologist at Lux Aeterna. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format, addressing AI experimentation, character development processes, evolving attitudes towards AI and practical implementation challenges. Interviews were conducted at three different production stages – pre-development, mid-development and during post-production – to capture the evolution of attitudes and perspectives throughout the project. This spacing proved crucial for understanding how experiences of the use of AI in the process changed as the project progressed and as the technology itself evolved during the research period.

The interview guide covered four main areas that emerged as significant during preliminary discussions with participants: (1) motivations for the use of AI provided insight into how creative professionals approach new technologies and what drives adoption decisions; (2) specific tools and techniques employed revealed practical aspects of AI integration and the learning processes involved in the use of new technologies; (3) character development methodologies allowed for detailed examination of creative processes and how the use of generative AI influenced traditional approaches and (4) ethical considerations and future applications addressed broader implications of AI use in creative contexts and long-term industry impacts. This structure allowed for both systematic data collection and emergent themes to develop naturally, following established practices in creative industries research while remaining flexible enough to capture unexpected insights. The longitudinal nature of these interviews allowed for tracking how attitudes and approaches towards AI evolved throughout the project. This approach revealed insights that might not have emerged from single-point-in-time studies, particularly regarding the evolution from initial enthusiasm to more strategic implementation.

This study focuses on a single case study with two participants from one organization, which, while allowing for detailed analysis of specific practices, limits generalizability to broader populations. The research also captures a specific moment in generative AI development during 2023–24, and rapid technological advancement may alter the relevance of certain findings as AI capabilities continue to evolve over time.

Visual experimentation

One of the significant aspects of the *RENO* project was its 'image first' approach to screenplay development, acknowledged by Pollock as led by both the potential of generative AI to produce experimental images that could generate initial ideas and Lux Aeterna's expertise within the VFX industry. Consideration of this approach addresses a research gap observed by Tang et al. who note that,

existing research largely focuses on text-based AI support, often overlooking the consideration of visual elements in the creative process. This limitation reduces the suitability of these approaches for certain types of creative writing, particularly screenwriting, which is inherently characterised by audiovisual and dynamic storytelling.

(2025: n.pag.)

The *RENO* team's initial visual experimentation with generative AI began in what Pollock described as a 'very R&D-driven way' and 'curiosity-driven' exploration. In the earliest stages, they utilized generative AI, primarily Midjourney, as an ideation tool. The team found that the initial versions of these tools produced 'abstract' results that, while technically less sophisticated than later iterations, offered unique creative opportunities. Pollock notes, 'It left room for interpretation so you could add your own thoughts into the mix. [...] The results were more unique and less derivative'. This phase can be characterized as experimental and open-ended, with the team using AI-generated imagery to inspire creative conversations and world-building. Rather than having specific deliverables or expectations from the technology, they were exploring the creative possibilities that emerged.

A significant challenge emerged as generative AI evolved to produce more polished outputs. Rather than enabling creativity, the team found these 'realistic', and 'very filmic cinematic' results constrained their creative exploration. While interviewed, James Pollock, creative technologist at Lux Aeterna, notes: 'We found ourselves somewhat painted into a corner by that process [...] our relationship to those ideas at that point became rather fixed, and it was challenging to navigate, readjust, and re-evaluate our creative direction'.

This led to the surprising decision by Lux Aeterna, as described by Pollock, to 'discard much of what the story was at that point' and much of the world-building they had developed through AI processes.

Character development

As the project progressed, the team began to use LLMs, such as ChatGPT, and a local LLM to assist with story development and character creation, including the development of concepts and themes for the story, which followed their own image-first creative process. This exploration aligns with growing recognition that AI creates new opportunities for characterization in screenwriting processes (Erpelding et al. 2024).

This initial engagement with LLMs can be illustrated by two prompts shared by James Pollock that were used in this work:

- Imagine some science fiction plots that have at their core the idea of overestimation and ignorance about AI.
- It's hard to come up with a story about AI that isn't full of classic tropes. The basic theme that I want to explore is how ignorance about and blind faith in technology can take us to bad places.

Pollock explained that these prompts were not intended to lead to the development of a complete idea but instead he hoped that an LLM would provide 'an interesting nugget that made us look at our existing ideas differently'. However, he found that this approach did not often provide valuable results; instead, a list of possible plots for the film was provided in response.

Pollock also explained how the team also explored using generative AI to develop the character of *RENO* (an AI entity within the story) by creating a character description for an LLM to follow. The Lux Aeterna team then role-played a conversation, taking the role of Suki, the film's protagonist. By engaging in dialogue with an AI version of their character, the team could test how the character might respond in various scenarios, helping to build a more consistent and nuanced portrayal. The AI functioned as a sounding board for character traits and responses, allowing the human writers to evaluate different possibilities before committing to specific character elements in the screenplay. However, although they found its responses funny, they were not particularly valuable for the development of the story. Hifle explained that:

I found the AI responses rather lacking in depth and nuance. While occasionally there would be something interesting, often the responses felt predictable or generic. The AI would follow logical patterns rather than exhibiting the complexity and contradictions that make compelling characters.

This sentiment aligns with the critique that AI-generated content often lacks the depth and nuance of human creativity, as noted by Luchen and Zhongwei (2023). The limitations experienced by the *RENO* team reflect broader challenges in using AI tools for creative processes that require emotional intelligence and understanding of human psychology, areas where current AI models still lag behind human capabilities.

The team noted that their AI character simulations sometimes reinforced stereotypical or predictable character traits, particularly around gender roles, personality archetypes and behavioural patterns. Additionally, the AI often defaulted to familiar science fiction tropes when generating responses for the AI character *RENO* itself, producing dialogue that echoed the emotionally detached, hyper-logical AI archetype. The system also demonstrated tendencies towards binary character motivations rather than the complex, contradictory personalities that characterize compelling dramatic writing. These patterns required human intervention to subvert with the writing team deliberately crafting prompts that challenged these defaults. This finding aligns with broader concerns about algorithmic bias and homogenization in AI-generated creative content, as identified by Bender et al. (2021), highlighting the ongoing need for human oversight and critical engagement.

Prompt engineering as creative practice

The *RENO* project revealed prompt engineering as a crucial skill for screenwriters working with generative AI. This practice involves crafting specific queries that elicit useful AI responses, representing what Lo (2023) characterizes as a specialized craft with its own techniques and creative possibilities. Vainikka et al. (2024) have studied this emerging practice in depth, noting that prompt engineering is rapidly evolving into a specialized craft with its own techniques, best practices and creative possibilities. Their research suggests that effective prompt engineering requires a sophisticated understanding of both the capabilities and limitations of AI, as well as the ability to formulate queries that elicit useful and creative responses.

In addition, Lo (2023) emphasizes creativity and intuition in creating prompts for AI, suggesting that the most effective prompts often involve a combination of technical precision and creative framing. Research shows that the use of generative AI has demonstrated benefits for character development. For example, Cavazza et al. (2001) explored AI-based virtual storytelling with characters that could respond dynamically. However, Tang et al. note that existing AI tools for screenwriting 'are often limited to isolated stages and lack integration across the creative workflow' (2025: 3). This combination reflects a broader pattern in which traditional creative skills are being repurposed and extended to engage with new technological possibilities.

The *RENO* team's experience confirmed such observations. They found that crafting effective prompts to generate useful content for character development, both visual and textual, and dialogue required considerable skill and experimentation. James Pollock described the learning curve:

Initially, we were very naive about how to prompt the AI effectively. We'd just ask straightforward questions and get predictable or useless responses. Over time, we developed more sophisticated approaches, building in constraints, providing specific examples of the kind of output we wanted, experimenting with different ways of framing the same basic query. It became a craft in itself.

The team found that effective prompting required significant creative investment, representing new forms of creative labour that screenwriters must master to effectively incorporate AI into their process. As Rob Hifle noted in the interview, 'there's significant investment of time and creative energy in learning how to communicate effectively with these systems. It's not just about using AI, it's about learning a new language to interact with it productively'.

The specific practice of AI-supported writing recognizes that authorship is collaborative work, extending traditional understandings of screenwriting as a collaborative process to include machine partners. As Conor (2014) notes, questions of authorship are central to understanding screenwriting as creative labour, even though films and television shows are results of collaborative work involving numerous human contributors. The use of generative AI introduces a new form of collaboration, one in which the 'collaborator' has no intentionality or creative agenda of its own but nonetheless shapes the creative output through its algorithmic responses. Vainikka et al. (2024) observe that successful prompt engineering requires time-consuming articulation of carefully created prompts and critical evaluation of responses. This process often involves multiple iterations, with the human writer refining prompts based on AI outputs and selectively incorporating or modifying AI-generated content. The result is neither purely human-authored nor machine-generated but emerges from the ongoing dialogue between human creative intention and machine processing.

The human–AI writing dynamic

The concept of 'Human in the Loop' has emerged as an important framework for understanding AI-assisted writing. To extend this, Mirowski et al. (2023) has developed an interactive framework for screenwriting with LLMs rooted in an understanding of the human-in-loop, which keeps the human writer as the central decision-maker while leveraging AI.

However, a challenge emerged in the *RENO* project related to the volume of AI-generated content. James Pollock described this as an 'overwhelming amount of information' that sometimes hindered rather than helped the process. He explained that '[a]s the generative AI tools evolved rapidly during the project timeline, the team observed that the outputs became increasingly polished and "filmic"'. However, this advancement came with unexpected drawbacks. He explained: 'I think ultimately that kind of hindered our progress because a level of interpretative flexibility was lost. It became difficult because it presents such a fixed perspective and concrete idea [...] you lose something valuable in that process'.

This realization led to a significant shift in how the team used AI for screenwriting. Rather than relying on it for core creative decisions, they transitioned to using generative AI for more specific tasks within the writing process.

Rob Hifle revealed a similar perspective regarding AI's role in the creative writing process. He noted that while they experimented with AI for story development and character creation, they approached it as a source of inspiration rather than being a tool capable of producing a final product. This approach addresses both the practical limitations of current AI and the ethical concerns about relying too heavily on AI-generated content in the screenwriting process. Hifle found that attempting to use AI for generating significant portions of dialogue or narrative content presented challenges, reflecting the same concerns that Pollock identified about the creative constraints that can emerge when relying on AI-generated content. Hifle elaborated on these concerns:

We found ourselves generating imagery that looked like every other sci-fi film of the last decade. The AI was drawing on common visual tropes and conventions rather than helping us break new ground. We had to consciously push against these tendencies to find something that felt fresh and distinctive.

Another challenge that emerged was how AI-generated content sometimes created a premature sense of finality or fixity in the creative process. The *RENO* team found that the highly polished quality of later AI outputs sometimes short-circuited this iterative process. James Pollock noted:

The very polished nature of what we were getting from the AI systems made it difficult to maintain a sense of creative flexibility. When you see something that looks like a finished concept artwork or reads like a polished scene, there's a psychological tendency to treat it as fixed rather than as a starting point for further development.

This observation points to an interesting paradox in AI-assisted creative work; tools designed to enhance creative flexibility can sometimes have the opposite effect, constraining creative thinking by presenting options that feel more finished than they actually are.

The engagement with generative AI throughout the writing process led to significant concerns around intellectual property implications when using LLMs for script development. For example, Rob Hifle explained that when you input material into an LLM, your writing could potentially be outputted elsewhere in the system. This led to a cautious approach to using AI for script development and character creation. Hifle explains that '[f]rom a protection standpoint, we've been extremely cautious. I've experimented with it by altering scenarios, scenes, and character names because I need to safeguard our intellectual property and ensure that our story concepts remain protected'.

Evaluation of approach

One of the most valuable insights from this case study is how the team's relationship with generative AI evolved throughout the project. This evolution followed a clear trajectory, which is reproduced here.

Stage one: Initial enthusiasm

The team began with significant enthusiasm and openness towards generative AI's potential, as James Pollock explained: 'We were just engaging with this technology in a very research-oriented, exploratory way [...] it was simply interesting to examine what was being generated and the results felt like they were emerging from some entirely novel creative space'.

This phase was characterized by exploration without predefined expectations or critical evaluation.

Stage two: Growing constraints

As the technology evolved and the team became more invested in AI-generated content, they began to feel constrained by it. As James Pollock explained, '[w]e had invested so much work through the AI processes [...] our relationship to those ideas at that point became rather fixed and difficult to modify'. The outputs that had initially inspired creativity began to limit it, leading to frustration and reconsideration of their approach.

Stage three: Creative decision-making

As the project progressed, the team developed a more nuanced and strategic approach to the use of generative AI. As James Pollock explained, they began to use 'it in a way where it's simply assisting our process. [...] We've utilised it as a starting point for further creative development'. Rather than using AI to drive the creative process, they repositioned it as a supplementary tool for specific tasks and contexts, while considering the ethical and copyright issues that would be crucial in a future commercial context.

Defining AI's role

Based on the *RENO* project findings, this study proposes a practical framework for defining AI's specific contributions to creative work. The most productive approach is clearly defining AI's role in screenplay development rather than positioning AI as a generic tool while considering ethical and copyright issues. Writers should consciously decide which specific roles they want AI to play, understanding that multiple roles can be adopted simultaneously but each requires different approaches and expectations. The traditional view of screenwriters as sole creators is shifting towards a collaborative human–AI model. As Tang et al. (2025) observe, screenwriters are gradually becoming curators or observers of AI-generated content in their expectations, raising concerns about originality, ownership and creative contributions.

The *RENO* project demonstrates how AI can serve multiple roles in the screenwriting process. Based on our findings, we propose that the most productive approach is to clearly define AI's role in screenplay development. Rather than positioning AI as a generic tool or assistant, writers should consciously decide which specific role(s) they

want AI to play. Multiple roles can be adopted, and five key roles are proposed, as following:

Research assistant: Using AI to gather information, explore ideas and provide relevant context.

AI has shown particular benefit as a research assistant in the screenwriting process (Sergi 2024) and James Pollock described this value of AI for research: 'It's comparable to having someone who is reasonably engaged with the subject matter and can efficiently extract and organise useful information'.

Character development tool: Employing AI to create and refine characters, simulate conversations and explore character dynamics.

This was evident in Lux Aeterna's approach to developing initial character ideas and the role-playing conversations between characters.

Co-writer or writing partner: Actively collaborating with AI tools to generate dialogue, scenes or plot elements.

The concept of AI authorship is advancing in film, games and interactive fiction, highlighting the potential of AI to replace or augment human authors in various media (Thorne 2020). According to the recent research by Dayo et al. (2023), 'AI authorship tools can generate dialogue and entire scenes based on predefined parameters and character profiles, inspiring scriptwriters and expanding the possibilities for story development' (2023: 28).

Editor or critical friend: Using AI to review drafts, suggest improvements and identify inconsistencies or weaknesses.

LLMs can take the role of editor, providing feedback and revisions to a writer (Chen et al. 2024). This presents the possibility of using AI as a 'critical friend' who can assess a screenplay from multiple perspectives.

Audience: Testing screenplay elements with AI to gauge potential audience reactions and understanding.

Rob Hifle's experience with using AI for character development supports this framework. While he found some aspects of AI-generated character dialogue 'lacking in depth', his experimental approach to using AI for specific elements of character development rather than full script generation aligns with the recommended strategy of defining specific roles for AI in the screenwriting process.

By clearly defining AI's role during the creative process, screenwriters can maintain control while benefiting from AI's strengths in specific areas. This approach also helps address ethical concerns by establishing clear boundaries and expectations.

Conclusion

The *RENO* project provides valuable insights into the practical implementation of AI throughout screenplay development. Rather than confirming either the utopian or dystopian narratives that often dominate discussions of AI in creative industries, it reveals a more nuanced reality where AI offers specific benefits and challenges depending on how it is implemented.

The Lux Aeterna team's journey, from initial enthusiasm through constraint to strategic implementation, offers a potential roadmap for screenwriters. Their experience suggests that the most effective approach is neither wholesale adoption nor complete rejection of AI but rather thoughtful integration that positions AI in specific, well-defined roles within human-directed creative processes. Rob Hifle's cautious approach to AI-assisted character development, changing 'scenarios, scenes, and character names' to protect intellectual property while still experimenting with the technology, demonstrates the careful balance required when integrating AI into creative writing. His finding that AI-generated dialogue was often 'lacking in depth' reinforces the importance of maintaining human creative judgement in the screenwriting process.

This balanced perspective may ultimately prove most valuable as screenwriters continue to navigate the rapidly evolving landscape. By consciously defining AI's role, whether as research assistant, character development tool, co-writer, editor or audience, writers can maintain their creative vision while leveraging the capabilities of AI. By defining AI's role clearly, establishing ethical guidelines and maintaining human creative control, screenwriters can leverage these new tools while preserving distinctly human qualities.

Ethical statement

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines>. Approval and subject consent were obtained.

Conflict of interest statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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